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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 002058

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SN](#)

SUBJECT: SINGAPORE POLITICS: OPENING WINDOWS, SWATTING FLIES

REF: A. SINGAPORE 1197

[1](#)B. SINGAPORE 1178

Classified By: Acting E/P Counselor Paul Horowitz, reason 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and Comment: Technology, social change, and hopes for creativity-driven economic growth engines have pushed Singapore's government to adapt its style, but little has fundamentally changed. From a well-publicized debate on whether to allow casinos to essays calling for political liberalization, the recent abundance of public discourse in Singapore might cause some to think that a more open society is taking shape here. The GOS still decides which issues are open for debate and its levers of control -- including defamation suits, a compliant press, and vaguely defined "out-of-bounds" markers -- are still firmly in place. In our view, there is no political liberalization at work, but there is more latitude for personal expression. It is important not to extrapolate from these modest changes and project a fully open or democratic society. Singapore leadership has simply established a new equilibrium point in their desire to maintain an orderly environment while promoting a vibrant, creative intellectual domain. End Summary and Comment.

The Spirit of Lee

[1](#)2. (U) In his first National Day Rally speech last August, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said, "We are so capable, we are so efficient, we are so comfortable that we stick with what we have tried and tested and found working and we are reluctant to take risks and try new things. And that is a weakness." This reflects a widely accepted prescription for "fixing" the Singapore model -- fostering entrepreneurship and creative thinking -- in order to mature from a manufacturing to an information and services based economy. Lee cautioned, however, that the government was unwilling to give up all control over public debate. Quoting Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's dictum, "When you open the windows, the flies come in," Lee added his own twist: "So, you can't close the windows, you'll just have to have a fly swatter."

Some Subjects No Longer Taboo...

[1](#)3. (U) Increased media coverage of "sensitive" issues during the first ten months of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's administration suggests a more open society. The most obvious example, dominating the news for the past year, was the contentious debate over whether Singapore should allow casinos (Ref A). Singapore's censors have continued to shed some of their traditional discomfort with sexually explicit material -- in May, for example, a Straits Times article announced (with a full-color photo) the Crazy Horse Paris Cabaret had selected Singapore as its Asian venue, with (semi-nude) performances beginning this fall.

[1](#)4. (U) Discussion of more overtly political issues also has increased. For example, the government's move in March to ban a short film about an opposition figure (Ref B) sparked negative reactions on weblogs that spilled over into mainstream media. In April, a government agency's threat to sue a Singaporean graduate student in the United States who had criticized the agency on his blog led to internet and newspaper discussion of the propriety of the government's using defamation suits to stifle free expression. In May, the impending execution of a man convicted of trafficking one kilogram of cannabis prompted a public forum, a candlelight vigil, and opposition party calls for abolishing capital punishment. Political observer Catherine Lim set off a modest storm of commentary when she argued in the "Straits Times" that, while the new practice of seeking bottom-up feedback was welcome, political freedom was still lacking. While individually these stories are unremarkable, taken together they present a contrast to Singapore's normally stifling media atmosphere.

But Off-Limits Still Broadly Defined

[1](#)5. (U) Many boundaries are still firmly in place. The GOS continues to enforce its ban on "foreign interference" in domestic politics. In April, a local NGO invited an Amnesty International representative to speak at a forum opposing capital punishment; authorities let him attend, but did not allow him to speak. Afterwards, the police publicly

questioned the forum's MC about her nationality -- she had alluded in her remarks to living abroad. In May, immigration officials denied entry to an American non-violence advocate who was coming to participate in a workshop organized by an opposition party; a Ministry of Home Affairs press release about the case cited an internet account of a similar workshop he had conducted in Singapore in January as the reason for the exclusion.

16. (U) The effective ban on artists' commenting on political subjects is another persistent boundary. While the GOS publicly claims it wants to cultivate creative talent, when local first-time filmmaker Martyn See entered his short film about opposition figure Chee Soon Juan ("Singapore Rebel") in the Singapore International Film Festival, he was advised to withdraw it and was later called in for police questioning.

Old and New Techniques

17. (C) Government figures continue to sue opponents for defamation (Ref B). By downplaying the role of intermediaries such as opposition parties, NGOs, and religious institutions, the GOS inhibits political mobilization by keeping interactions between individual citizens and the government. It reinforces the more overt "out-of-bounds" markers by creating a sense of quiet but ever-present official vigilance. The suggestion that a defamation suit could be filed against someone who posts objectionable material on a weblog plants the idea that the government monitors the internet. Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng's statement that Singaporeans have no reason to fear being "locked up in jail, disappearing in the middle of the night and you don't come back" reminds Singaporeans that such things have happened here in most citizens' living memory. Political commentator Cherian George remarked to poloffs that, with its rich history of using the machinery of state to keep its political foes in line, the People's Action Party (PAP) today only has to employ token amounts of "repression" to remind would-be opponents of its power.

Comment: Finding the New Equilibrium Point

18. (C) Singapore's leadership recognizes the impossibility of maintaining a monopoly on the flow of information in the internet age and they are experimenting with ways of selectively loosening the reins without losing control. The casino issue tested this new approach: the government selected the issue and set the terms of debate; it encouraged the public to express their views and professed to listen when they did; it announced the decision everyone expected and signaled its expectation that the public would close ranks in support.

19. (C) Singaporean leaders are changing their style because they believe they must. They have created a prosperous, efficient, crime-free state, with a cosseted press and no effective opposition. They remain vulnerable, however, to exogenous economic developments and are single-minded in pursuit of guarantors of future economic growth. Fine-tuning the level of political discourse responds to the challenges to governing that a technologically savvy society in the information age poses. They hope it might also contribute to domestic dynamism. Given the sophistication and education of the population and its unfettered access to information about the rest of the world, one is tempted to conclude that Singapore's constraints on public discourse and political activity are unsustainable in the medium term. While this may be an attractive proposition, the PAP nevertheless continues to satisfy most of the people most of the time, and we see no signs of bubbling discontent serious enough to disrupt the orderly and disciplined polity that is Singapore.

110. (C) The government has limited appetite for reform, seeking as it does the benefits of a more open society without the costs. Yet its rhetoric will continue to imply more open days ahead. In part, this allows the government to co-opt the issue. In part it reflects at least a bit of sincerity. If Singapore has to choose between control and a more vibrant society, it will choose control every time. Remember, changes in Singapore are undertaken in order to perpetuate the system, not to reform it.

LAVIN